

34. *To a young man engaged to be married*

My dear François, in my last letter I invited you to take advantage of the privileged time of your engagement to discover the riches and demands of love, so that you can build your marriage on a solid foundation. But your union with Christ should also benefit immensely from this wonderful experience of betrothal.

I know, of course, that it is sometimes said that the hearts and minds of an engaged couple are closed to everyone else. That's true in the case of a selfish, possessive, and carnal love. But it is not true of real Christians. Their love, on the contrary, opens their hearts and minds to others, to the world, and to God. I have often seen for myself that this is so.

May your engagement be a path that leads to God! May it inspire you to give him thanks for your happiness and ask for his help! Above all, may it enable you to advance deeper into the knowledge and love of Christ!

Life with Christ (especially during mental prayer) is also a dialogue of love, a spiritual encounter, and a communion of souls. Admittedly, sensibility and emotion play a great role in the love of an engaged couple. The soul's love for Christ, on the other hand, while not excluding nuances of sensibility and affectivity, is rooted above all in faith. The fact remains that the same fundamental laws are at work at all levels of love.

A letter I recently received illustrates what I have just said:

My habit of always beginning my mental prayer by offering God my joy, goes back to the distant days of my engagement to be married. And this is how it came about. When Bernadette and I were together, I would be terribly unhappy if I sensed that she was not happy. I was equally wretched when, in her letter, she failed to say that our separation was hard for her. On the other hand, when we were together, I was filled with intense happiness if she seemed to radiate joy. I was very happy, too, when she wrote me of her sadness at being away from me.

"These reactions began to worry me. Why did I need her to be happy when she was near, and unhappy when we were apart? Were these not mediocre, egocentric feelings, revealing self-love rather than a disinterested love for her? I remember mulling this question over and over until one day I saw the light: to love another person is to want that person to be happy. When contemplating marriage, one must ask oneself whether one is capable of making the other happy, or being the other's happiness. Anyone who did not ask himself the question with a certain anxiety could not be genuinely in love.

"The day I understood this, I was freed from all anxiety and scruples, and I was as proud as if I had been the first to make the discovery. The next day, when Bernadette asked me what she could do to make me happy, I had my answer already. 'Nothing except to be happy yourself; happy over my presence and my love; happy over me. Your joy that I read so often in your face and in your eyes, the joy I guess at in your heart, that is the most wonderful gift you can offer me.'

"That evening, as I prayed by my bed before retiring, a thought suddenly came to me. If the most Bernadette can do to make me happy is to offer me her joy over being loved by me, then there is probably nothing better I can do to make God happy than offer him

my joy in his presence, in his love, and in his happiness. I quickly realized that this joy on my part was not very strong, and I was deeply ashamed. I promised myself to visit with my God more assiduously, so that this joy might grow within me, and so that my offering might become more pleasing to him.

“Many years have gone by. I have rarely missed my daily mental prayer, and I always begin by offering up my joy. Not the least benefit of this, is that I am brought each day to ask myself the question: is God really my joy? If I notice that this joy is decreasing, I know what conclusion to draw. I must become more attentive to my God’s love for me.”

My dear François, that is only an example. At least it has the merit of clearly showing how human love, in one of its aspects, can be an invitation to divine love. But there is also the need to live this human love well, to recognize its riches and demands, and to discern the illusions within it to the world of divine grace.